

Journey from Powerlessness to Empowerment in Alice Walker's *Meridian*

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Abstract

The paper aims at exhibiting how Alice Walker empowers the oppressed women of her community and depicts their liberation from oppression and marginalisation in her novel, *Meridian*. African-American women belong to the excluded community and are endangered by the evils of racism, sexism, and classicism. Meridian Hill, the protagonist breaks the stereotypes and participates in the Civil Rights Movement, thus transcending the barriers of gender to achieve individual autonomy, self-reliance, and self-realization. She struggles to change the oppressive nature of her society in order to ensure a complete development of the people of her community, especially the black women. Besides the themes of racism, sexism, classism, religion, slavery, and segregation, African-American literature explores the ideas of equality, empowerment, and freedom which were long denied to the black people in white America. The novel depicts the triumph and empowerment of black women through the character of Meridian Hill.

Keywords- African American, Empowerment, Meridian, Black, Civil Rights Movement

Alice Walker has been rated among the top and prolific writers of America. She became internationally known in the 1980s with the publication of *The Color Purple* and its subsequent film production, becoming the first African-American woman fiction writer to receive the Pulitzer Prize. Walker's works are closely related to the issues of race, gender, and self-exploration. As a political activist, she worked for the civil rights and participated actively in the Civil Rights Movement. Her fiction portrays the pain and struggle of the black people who were brutally enslaved. It focuses directly or indirectly on the black women's lives, the oppression they face, and their survival. Deborah King in her essay entitled "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness," argues that black women suffer from multiple forms of oppression i.e. "racism multiplied by sexism, multiplied by classicism" (47). In the same light, Walker's characters are the victims of racial, sexual, and economic oppression and exist under degrading circumstances. Besides the depiction of black women's oppression, she masterfully describes how they attain emancipation from that oppression.

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Meridian (1976), Walker's second and one of the most celebrated novels narrates the story of a black woman, Meridian Hill and her journey from oppression and powerlessness towards development and freedom. The novel is set against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement which aimed at eliminating racial discrimination and granting of voting rights to the black people in the United States. Although the slavery era in America had ended way back in 1865, black Americans were yet to get their voting rights till the advent of the Civil Rights Movement. The movement turned out to be a watershed in the history of America as it united the whole black community and resulted in their freedom from segregation. *Meridian* reflects on the predicament that black people suffered during and after the movement. It analyses the invaluable contribution of black woman leadership which ultimately leads towards the emancipation and upliftment of whole black community. In the essay entitled, "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" Walker writes about how the movement benefitted American black people:

If the Civil Rights Movement is "dead," and if it gave us nothing else, it gave us each other forever . . . It broke the pattern of black servitude in this country. It shattered the phony "promise" of white soap operas that sucked away so many pitiful lives. It gave us history and men far greater than Presidents. It gave us heroes, selfless men of courage and strength, for our little boys and girls to follow. It gave us hope for tomorrow. It called us to life. (*Mothers' Gardens*, 128-29)

Meridian is semi-autobiographical as it is based on some of Walker's personal experiences during the Civil Rights Movement. Meridian, like Walker, completes her education on a scholarship and later participates in the Civil Rights Movement and the drives related to voter registration. Black men and women differed in their sufferings as black men had to fight with racism only whereas black women had to encounter with both racial and gender discriminations. Both the white people as well as black men used to belittle black women. One more problem that the black women faced was their poverty. *Meridian* makes the point that it is also the black women along with the black men who made the movement successful. The novel recognizes the significance of female participation in the liberation of black community. Meridian leads the masses and serves her people. She selflessly works for the upliftment of her people irrespective of gender, class, or age.

Her mother had taught her nothing about sex, and Meridian for the first time learns about this experience after getting molested at the funeral home. Consequently, she develops a relationship with Eddie with the sole purpose of protecting herself from other men in the neighbourhood. She drops out of school after becoming pregnant by him and gives birth to the son, Eddie Jr. This does not affect Eddie as the sexist society lets him to continue his studies. He requests Meridian to forgive him for impregnating her to which she replies, "“Forgive you for what?” It had not occurred to her to blame him. She felt, being pregnant, almost as if she'd contracted a communicable disease, that the germs had been in the air and that her catching the disease was no one's fault" (*Meridian* 58). Meridian begins to lose

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interest in sex after marriage and Eddie cheats on her and abandons her completely. She feels suicidal while sitting at home and even thinks of killing her child. Out of her own choice, she ends her marriage with him and gives her son for adoption, transcending the roles of a wife and mother. “It took everything she had to tend to the child, and she had to do it, her body prompted not by her own desires, but by her son’s cries. So this, she mumbled, lurching toward his crib in the middle of the night, is what slavery is like” (*Meridian* 69). While watching television one day, she saw black men hosting a voter registration drive which resulted in the bombing of the house where the drive was held and the killing of children who lived in the neighbourhood. She decides to participate in the movement and makes her brother-in-law take care of her child. Meanwhile she meets Truman Held and falls in love with him.

She renounces her child and joins the Saxon College to participate in the Civil Rights Movement. Initially, she feels very guilty for leaving her child and begins to have the “nightmares that began to trouble her sleep. Nightmares of the child, Rundi, calling to her, crying, suffering unbearable deprivations because she was not there, yet she knew it was just the opposite: Because she was not there he needn’t worry, ever, about being deprived” (*Meridian*89-90). However, she renounces her idea of motherhood and becomes a revolutionary and opposes to the norms of the racist and sexist society. By doing so, she discovers her own identity. Meridian leaves all the gender roles and explores the dimensions of her growth as a social and community activist. Her relationship with Truman Held becomes another reason for her growth and development. However, his love for her does not last too long and he leaves her for a White girl, Lynne Rabinowitz. Meridian had already become pregnant by him and she decides to abort the child rather than informing him about her pregnancy. Walker describes her feelings and writes, “On her way to have an abortion she saw them riding across campus in her father’s new red car. From a distance, they both looked white to her, that day” (*Meridian*118). She rises above her sexual weakness and never questions Truman about his deserting her. Walker narrates the doleful experience of her abortion in these words: “Later, as the doctor tore into her body without giving her anaesthesia (and while he lectured her on her morals) and she saw stars because of the pain, she was still seeing them laughing, carefree, together” (*Meridian*118). Even after the end of their relationship, Meridian and Truman remain friends forever. She provides him solace and comfort. Lynne also visits her and she functions as a mother to both Lynne and Truman in their stress and offers them timely advice and guidance. She liberates herself from the bondage of sex and motherhood by undergoing the abortion and sterilization. These feelings of guilt instil in her a new sense of awakening and confidence.

Meridian emerges a selfless leader in the Civil Rights Movement despite the politics of race and gender. Walker asserts that the movement was marred by sexism. Black men, like the white patriarchs, misused their masculinity. They were demanding black women to be more passive and subordinate. As Karen Stein writes, “. . . the novel points out that the Civil

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Rights Movement often reflected the oppressiveness of patriarchal capitalism. Activists merely turned political rhetoric to their own ends while continuing to repress spontaneous individuality. To overcome this destructiveness, Walker reaches for a new definition of revolution” (66). Black men took higher positions while the women were provided menial jobs. Meridian was given the task of “typing, teaching illiterates to read and write, demonstrating against segregated facilities and keeping the Movement house open when the other workers returned to school” (*Meridian* 82), while the men activists like Swinburne, Chester Gray, and Truman Held hold high posts. Gerri Bates remarks that Walker “explores the sexism within the movement, an often-neglected aspect. She also shows how African American women made sacrifices in their lives to join the campaign to free their people” (73). She further states that the novel “challenges the African American male stance on the nationalist position, which idealised African American manhood. The contribution and oppression of women went unacknowledged” (73).

Many educated black youth participated in the movement and Meridian played a pivotal role in granting voting rights to her community. Along with Anne-Marion, she participated significantly in helping the movement proceed. She negated the offer of violence and instead vowed to educate the people of her community about their life and the right to vote. When Anne-Marion asked her whether she could ‘kill’ for the revolution, she replied in negative and stated that “I will go back to the people, live among them, like Civil Rights workers used to do” (*Meridian*19). Despite her failing health, she offered a lot of sacrifices.

Meridian’s journey from being a lower middle class black woman to getting admission in prestigious colleges in Atlanta and simultaneous participation in the movement was not an easy task. During her activism in the college, she faced beatings and arrests, but stood with utmost resolution. She worked unconditionally for the betterment of her community and tussled with motherhood. She awoke her community about the plight of black women and helped them in breaking stereotypes amidst the barriers of race and gender. Wile Chile, the young, homeless pregnant girl did not respond to anything after discovering her pregnancy. Meridian captured her and “brought her onto the campus with a catgut string around her arm; when Wile Chile tried to run Meridian pulled her back” (*Meridian*25). Later, Wile Chile was hit by a speedy vehicle and got killed. The school chapel did not permit them to bury her there; they put the corpse under the famous Sojourner tree and buried her in one of the overgrown corners of a local black graveyard. They destroyed the Sojourner tree completely by sawing it down after coming back from the funeral as a mark of protest. Meridian, despite the restrictions and bourgeois ethics and values of the Saxon College, denied the directions issued by the college authorities and helped her community by whatever possible ways and means. She performed the tasks of running voter registration drives, educating the black masses, and uplifting the status of black women.

Meridian bravely confronted with the problems put forth by the Civil Rights Movement and selflessly contributed to it. Even after the end of the movement, she continued

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her activism and determination to help the helpless black people. She moved to Chicokema, a small town where segregation still continued and worked for the betterment of the people. The people of the town were still ignorant of their voting rights and were treated as second class citizens. Meridian vowed to enlighten them about their basic rights and plight. She carried the bloated body of the poor black child who had died by drowning into the water pool to a town meeting. She forced the white administrators of the place to cover the pool up, signifying a victory for the black people. She took a group of small children of the planters to show them a mummified woman surrounded by loaded tanks and challenged white supremacy and segregation. The children of the town were made to believe that they were an inferior race. Meridian helped them, took them to the market, and lined them up to show them the 'mummy lady.' "That's when this weird gal that strolled into town last year come in. She started to round up every one of the po' kids she could get her hands on" (*Meridian* 6).

Combining her intellectualism and activism, she sacrificed everything for the community and urged black people in Chicokema that, "they would learn, as their smallest resistance to the murder of their children, to use the vote" (*Meridian* 209). Meridian was conditioned by the patriarchal society to suppress her individuality and identity which she did not conform to. She underwent a process of transformation while fighting for the rights of her people during the movement and lived the way she liked. She exhibited concern for the wholeness of her community and wrote:

there is water in the world for us
brought by our friends
though the rock of mother and god
vanishes into sand
and we, cast out alone
to heal
and re-create
ourselves. (*Meridian* 236)

Meridian proposes that black women may serve as agents of positive change and largely contribute to ameliorate their society. It traces Meridian's journey from a subservient and amenable girl to an activist and fighter of black women's freedom. She aspires for not only her own emancipation but the emancipation and empowerment of all black women. She protests against the existing laws and anarchy and finds a new sense of identity. The novel depicts her strength as she finally walks away from the house, reflecting her distinguished individuality and an undefeated sense of struggle for equality and freedom. She comes up to be strong and independent.

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